

Why I Travel the World Speaking to People

BY W MITCHELL

International Keynote Speaker • Author • National & Business Leader • Triumphant Victor



W Mitchell was involved in a terrible accident when his motorcycle was hit by a truck. The fuel caught fire and he suffered terrible burns to 65 per cent of his body. He was later involved in a plane crash that left him unable to walk. Despite these setbacks, today Mitchell travels the world spreading his message of hope to others — it's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it.

"The chief cause of human error, is to be found in the prejudices picked up in childhood."

Rene Descartes

After my first accident, when I got out of hospital, I walked quite a bit to build my strength back up. It must have been quite a show.

I had Puppy, my huge, male Great Dane. He walked with me everywhere. And because the plastic surgeons kept emphasizing that I shouldn't get too much sun, I would always wear a hat – usually my Smokey the Bear hat.

Well, the sight must have been unbelievable. This monster dog, and this emaciated, burned up, fingerless guy with long hair and a drill instructor's hat, strolling the boulevards of San Francisco. In a city full of weird looking people, especially in those Haight-Ashbury days, I must have ranked among the weirdest. The sight obviously did overload a few circuits. I remember a couple of cases in particular.

How it started...

Once, I walked to the hospital to visit some patients. The nurses had actually put me to work, making the rounds of bum patients. I told them things like, "Man, you're the only guy in this place who's as funny-looking as I am," as a way to help them gain some perspective. This was probably the start of my sharing the message: "It's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it."

Anyway, on this particular trip, I told Puppy, to stay at the entrance. He was very good about this. He simply would not move and at 125 muscular pounds in weight, few people were inclined to move him.

When I came out a man staggered up, obviously drunk and started to berate me. "God, you're a mess. Jesus, you're the ugliest thing I ever saw. What the hell do you think you're doing here? I'm gonna beat that ugly face of yours," he railed at me.

Despite the guy's condition and the fact that he was probably twenty years older than me, there was simply no way I could have defended myself. I had been a superb physical specimen, an excellent skier, a cable-car gripman, a guy who never had anything to fear. To feel so defenseless was a new and not so pleasant sensation.

When I said nothing, he got more abusive as he realized I was not going to fight back. Just as he was ready to begin, I noticed my dog had reappeared. So I said, "Look, I'm pretty messed up. I won't be much of a match for you. But would you like to fight my buddy?"

He said, "Sure."

I said "Puppy, come, I want you to meet this guy because he wants to fight with you." The fellow took one look at the dog, froze for an instant and then took off so fast even Puppy couldn't have caught him.

It was an early, but classic example of what was to become my overriding philosophy: Do whatever it takes. In this case, the simple solution – pounding the guy into hamburger – was denied to me, so I had to get creative. What would I have done if Puppy had not bounded up?

Perhaps I would have started a conversation with the guy. Maybe I would have enlisted the aid of a bystander. I could have zipped back inside the hospital. At every moment, we have more options than we can imagine; and one good thing that comes from handicaps is that it opens one's eyes to the reality of that.

In any case, this guy was an example of the kind of garbage that gets poured into some unfortunate people's brains, usually when they are children and can't ward it off. Fortunately, such profoundly insensitive people are rare.

The worst was yet to come...

But the most distressing situation arose as Puppy and I walked passed a primary school playground. One kid spotted me, shouted something to the others and soon they all broke off their playing and ran to the fence to stare at me. Then, by twos and threes at first, but soon en masse, they chanted: Monster, monster, monster, monster..." Teachers swooped down on them immediately, herding them inside, admonishing them for such behavior.

But I was struck by a feeling of loss. I was not offended by what they had said. I did, indeed, resemble a monster that a child might have seen in a movie – rather like Freddy Kruger with a few Frankenstein stitches thrown in.

But I had an overwhelming desire to show them a vital truth: that someone who looks monstrous on the outside can be good, warm, funny, and caring on the inside, someone you might like as well as you like your best friend. I knew that chewing out those kids for their boorishness would not be half as effective as personally showing them their honest mistake. That there was a good person under all that scar tissue. I wanted to tell them something that a wonderful speaker and good friend shared with me much later. That the wrapping might have been damaged but the gift inside was still in good shape.

I think at that moment I subconsciously resolved to make sharing that message with people, especially kids, the focus of my life.